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Constructing the assertive teacher

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This paper describes an in-service MA course for teachers which focuses directly on their own developing professional practice in school. It is shown how after capturing, in their personal writing, incidents arising within their work, teachers on the course re-describe these incidents with an emphasis on asserting the actions they might take in respect of them. .

INTRODUCTION

Notions of the reflective practitioner (for example Schon 1983, Elliot, 1993) have held considerable influence within various programmes concerned with in-service training for teachers. Recognising, as they do, the centrality of the teacher, the emphasis of study in such courses becomes the description of this teacher, and the situation in which he or she operates, as seen through the eyes of this very teacher. Teachers following the MA in Teaching at Manchester Metropolitan University initially seek to capture aspects of their practice through recounting descriptions of incidents within their everyday practice and the context within which these arise. Through this writing they become more aware of how they are positioned within this context and how this influences their actions within it. As the course progresses the emphasis shifts towards the practitioners being more aware of how they can assert a more active role for themselves in shaping their own practice. It is this shift that will be considered here.

The everyday task of teaching is a complex affair and evades simple description. It is experienced as a sequence of conversations, meetings, conscious actions, impulsive responses, planned activities, unexpected distractions and much more. It can be difficult to identify key issues governing the progression of all this through time. The course enables the practitioners to grapple with this complexity so that they might develop their ability to operate effectively within it. In speaking of teaching it is very easy produce anecdotes capturing a variety of incidents but there can be a risk of such accounts collapsing in to mere chatter. However, anecdotes can provide a powerful point of entry enabling the practitioner to talk constructively about his or her practice. In giving a focused account of a particular incident the teacher is revealing his or her individual perspective and, by implication, something of themselves. By noticing their way of acting in particular situations teachers can start to learn about how they do things which in turn offers the opportunity for them to decide to change what they are doing. This in some ways echoes Dockar-Drysdale's (1990, pp. 98-111) work with emotionally deprived adolescents on symbolization. Here the teacher enabled students to build an orienting structure to their lives by helping them to characterise pieces of their experience. The aim of such *symbolization* was to enable students to 'store a realised experience in such a way

that this can be preserved and, if need be, communicated'. This essentially human process is being heightened for these children. Similarly, practitioners on the MA course, who are concerned with identifying characteristics of themselves, can work on heightening their awareness of how they capture their own experience. As these characteristics emerge reference points are provided as a structure develops, enabling the practitioner to map out some sense of their overall practice and the situation in which it arises.

In this paper I will lean on ideas from a number of modern theoretical traditions. In discussing the developmental aspects of this course, the notion of the human subject as described within post-structuralist writings, will be introduced. Here the notions of the 'practitioner' and the 'situation', in which he or she operates, are seen as being held in the descriptions offered in respect of them. The discussion also draws on Schutz's (1962) work in phenomenology and in particular employs his distinction between 'because' and 'in-order-to' motives in offering alternative readings of incidents within the teacher's everyday practice. By recognising that any action by a teacher is simultaneously responsive and intentional, the teacher can decide to build modes of describing his or her practice which emphasise the latter.

THE POST-STRUCTURALIST SUBJECT

Post-structuralist writing over the last twenty years or so has radically re-written the notion of the human subject (see for example Coward & Ellis, 1977, Easthope & McGowan 1992). Rather than being a subject in themselves he or she is seen as being positioned in language, as an identity held in the stories told about him or her. Similarly, the situation in which this subject acts is also constructed. Such a view asserts an essential instability in both subject and situation so that there is a need to analyse both, which can be seen as part of each other, as processes. The subject, and the structure in which he or she acts are asserted, in the ways they are represented in linguistic categories, through time. This is always subject to change as more stories can always be told. These linguistic representations are not mere labellings but are instrumental in the construction of subject and structure. It is the very process of signifying in language that brings into being the notions described and these notions then serve in shaping subsequent actions.

For teachers on the MA course, the initial task entails capturing the context as they see it and identifying their position within it. This implies a '*stressing and ignoring process*' (see Gattegno, 1971, p.11) consequential to their engagement in their situation. This process, which takes place over a year, moves the practitioner towards developing a customised language for describing their practice and the situation in which they see it arising. This is very much to do with building categories for effective description of their practice. This might be seen as an on-going process of re-scripting that increasingly asserts what the practitioner can do in respect of the situations he or she faces. By capturing successive accounts in writing the practitioner can become aware of the changes taking place in his or her self, in the situation and in his or her way of describing it. The commitment of thoughts in writing, in the form of a diary, provides for the practitioner, a device for re-organising his or her perceptions of the situations

experienced. The linguistic categories passed through in this process are transitory, holding devices, facilitating the shift from a receptive to an active mode. This process is in some ways akin to Schon's (1983) notion of 'naming and framing'. In deciding to act, however, it is, in a sense, necessary to 'suspend doubt' (Schutz, 1962, p.229) and act as if the current way of seeing the situation, the present framing, is accurate.

An important aspect of the course contributing to the development of this customised language is collaborative work with fellow students and tutors. Verbal and written accounts offered by the students are scrutinised by colleagues in small group discussions, aimed at tightening up the language used and sharpening subsequent action in school. As part of this process students visit each other in school so that alternative perspectives might be offered about the situations being described. As the course progresses an increasing emphasis is placed on more extensive critical reading to enable the developing notion of self and situation to be contextualised more broadly. The practitioner is positioned in a multitude of other discourses (e.g. gender or race of teacher, experience and status in school, political stand etc) which need to be examined in the on-going construction of self. It is through reading and consultations with tutors and peers that ideological insularity embedded in common sense attitudes can be challenged. This process echoes what Habermas sees as the 'emancipatory' dimension of education as discussed by, for example, Gallagher (1992) and Carr & Kemmis (1986).

In describing things in the world the practitioner is by implication describing their relation to these things. As the practitioner continues to build up a collection of such descriptions of things in the world around, he or she is positioning his or her self in relation to them. In this way, through the reflexivity of such acts, the practitioner is characterising him or her self by the way in which he or she perceives the world around. In building such a picture of themselves practitioners on the course are asked to describe incidents arising in their professional practice as a vehicle through which they get a sense of their being in the world, captured in the categories implicit in the language being used. For example, a practitioner might describe the first two minutes of a lesson they gave, or a single piece of work by a child, or a minute long conversation with a child. This exercise simultaneously generates stories about the practitioner and the situation of which they are part. Initial stages of the course might then be seen in terms of collecting a variety of such pen portraits, each capturing some specific incident which in some way reveals the practitioner acting in their professional context. By analysing and comparing these pen portraits the practitioner can build up a picture of themselves in their professional setting. Any stories told by the practitioner about commonalities between these pen portraits can be seen as a move in to a more generalised view of this practitioner but still grounded in specific incidents.

This whole process is concerned with the construction of the practitioner's professional identity. By using the psychoanalytic technique of free-associating links between the incidents described the teachers can be asked to say what this tells them about themselves. In a recent paper Brown, Hardy and Wilson (1993) described some work concerned with exploring how the psychoanalytic work of Lacan offers valuable insight into how the mathematical teacher or learner can be described. They achieved this by

exploring their understanding of certain Lacanian notions and how these could be reconciled within their own practice as mathematics educators. Their method entailed collecting together a number of cards each containing a summary of a particular Lacanian notion. Selecting two cards at a time at random, they free-associated connections they saw between the two cards. These connections however, were very much from their own perspective as mathematics educators. In describing these connections the authors were clearly describing bits of themselves and were simultaneously bringing a structure to their practice from a new perspective. For Lacan (Lacan/Wilden, 1968, pp. 209-228), the speech offered within a psychoanalytic session, is more stable, or at least more accountable, than the thoughts this speech represents for the individual. By committing thoughts to actual realised speech a certain 'fixation' takes place which offers an orientation to thought (see Brown, 1994, Brown, in press, Dockar-Drysdale, 1990).

For practitioners on the course there is a similar task to that described by Brown et al (1993). Their field of practice as they see it is captured through a selection of localised pen portraits each offering a snap shot of the teacher in action. These almost arbitrary snippets can be seen as nodal points around which the overall field of practice can be oriented. Through comparing and contrasting pen portraits the space between these nodal points can be filled as more general characteristics of the teacher emerge through the telling of successive stories. These generalisations however, are grounded in the specific incidents through which they were themselves generated. This is rather in the spirit of Levi-Strauss's work (see Sturrock 1979). Levi-Strauss, arguably, the original structuralist, explored the myths prevailing in certain primitive societies. By collecting and analysing the myths of a particular society he identified common threads which emerged, providing some sense of an essence to non-members. In this way he argued that it was possible to locate and describe some objective structure underlying the mode in which the society operates. The task of the practitioner is to learn about themselves as an acting subject through identifying characteristics that re-occur in the various pen portraits. Through these methods they move towards categorising the situation of which they are part.

The assertive teacher, however, has a need to categorise his or her practice with a view to action. By shifting attention in this way, writing done for the course, in respect of professional practice, becomes a mechanism for clarifying objectives and possible outcomes. The writing provides a way of holding the categorisation, if only for a moment. The teacher then acting as if the present categorisation is valid has a framework through which to assess his or her actions. Changes in categorisations arise through the passage of time as the perceived field of action shifts in relation to successive sets of concerns.

'BECAUSE' AND 'IN-ORDER-TO' MOTIVES

From passive to assertive

In describing developing professional practice there is a need to build in an effective mechanism to account for the time dimension implicit in this process. Any action can be seen as having both a responsive and intentional component. That is, any action

simultaneously has a cause and is a cause. In dealing with this Schutz (1962, pp 21-22) draws a distinction between 'because' and 'in-order-to' motives to separate two different sets of concepts.

'a) We may say that the motive of a murderer was to obtain the money of the victim. Here 'motive' means the state of affairs, the end, which is to be brought about by the action undertaken. We shall call this kind of motive the 'in-order-to motive'...

b) We may say that the murderer has been motivated to commit his deed because he grew up in this or that environment, had these or those childhood experiences etc. This class of motives which we shall call '..because motives' refers from the point of view of the actor to his past experiences which have determined him to act as he did.'

It is often a characteristic of practitioners starting on the MA course to emphasise 'because' motives in their writing. The emphasis is on the situation as they see it; how the school operates, what the teachers and children are like, their views on the school administration, how they judge themselves as teachers, etc. The school is constructed according to the categories through which it is perceived by the practitioner as an observer and participant. Such accounts are perhaps seductive, especially for in-service practitioners on an evening course wishing to off-load after a hard day teaching in school. Such accounts tend to locate the teacher as a recipient of a given situation. In the turmoil of things happening in a stressful day, accounts of how the world appear, seem more immediately pressing than a reflective response concerned with identifying the intentional component of what the teacher did. The fatalism endemic in such teacher accounts can be seen as dis-empowering where the teacher is passively receiving that thrown at them. Their accounts emphasise their response rather than their resolve.

In many respects the course's principal function is to enable the practitioner to re-describe their situation in terms of what they can do about it. This is to do with building a more assertive voice, categorising their practice according to the control they can have over it. Given a particular situation how do I act now? The focus moves towards responsibility and control. The task for the practitioner becomes more to do with learning about how he or she does things in certain situations. Accounts now capture the practitioner's view of their intentional and potential actions rather than descriptions of arbitrarily chosen situations. The picture the practitioner constructs of themselves becomes one of someone making decisions about how they need to act, in-order-to bring about a certain state of affairs.

PRACTITIONERS' WRITING

To give a flavour to this I shall offer some examples of writing by practitioners following the course. These have been selected within an intention to highlight the practitioners identifying shifts in their perception as they survey possible actions.

Example 1

A deputy head on the course was exploring her developing role as a 'change agent' through time and as she switched posts within her school. In particular her writing tracks her progress from seeing her role as someone responsible for changing others to seeing it as one where her role was to change herself. As she says in the introduction to a piece of writing:

This writing catalogues my own experiences and gradual realisation that to effect change at classroom level there needs to be a whole school understanding and ownership of development. One or even a small group of people will not bring about an attitudinal shift resulting in good practice even, as I will demonstrate if that one person is at senior management level. What is required is not the management of change itself, though obviously there must be an element of that. It requires a change in management itself and managerial style - based on the premise that all staff are managers to some degree.

The subsequent writing examines the strategies she employed towards setting up working practices which enabled her colleagues to assert the managerial component of their respective tasks.

Example 2

A teacher experiencing problems within her class teaching was trying to find a way of using her writing as part of the course as a mechanism through which she might develop more positive attitudes about her teaching. Her initial writings displayed considerable despondency, firmly emphasising a fatalistic attitude whereby she was in a situation over which she had no control. The task she was set by tutors involved identifying situations she enjoyed and then cataloguing the circumstances which gave rise to such happier states of affairs. In particular, she was asked to focus on what she had done in bringing them about. In reflecting about such reports she was urged to explore the control she had over such situations towards deciding what she might need to do towards making such things happen more frequently within her practice.

As an example, although she had definite qualms about using it, she introduced a reward system in her classroom. Through this mechanism she was able to explore and document aspects of the control she had over the situation. Through this somewhat artificial device she was able to isolate certain aspects of her way of dealing with the children towards assessing their effectiveness. Through negotiating with the children, the nature of the reward (putting peas in a jar as a sort of points system), the sort of behaviour, good or bad, that was at issue and the way in which the system should be organised, she was able, through her writing, to monitor her actions in specific situations. By observing herself operating in a very specific situation she was able to learn about herself and the situation of which she was part. In assessing the scheme's success the teacher, in a rather more positive tone, questioned:

Is it because it has drawn my attention to the fact that I was perhaps going over the top at some types of behaviour and that I was not being consistent in my dealings with these behaviours by coming down hard on some children and being lenient with others. Perhaps yes. But what I feel it has done is highlighted the areas of behaviour that the

children don't like/accept and by trying to reduce annoyance in them they are becoming easier to relate to and get to know.

Example 3

A senior teacher on the course was seeking to explore the differences between the public image of the school and the 'actual' way in which it worked. He used the following transcript of a speech between himself and a first year child in a carefully prepared home economics area to highlight the issue.

Child: Is this the material for the primary (school) visits?

Teacher: Yes that's right

Child: I remember when I visited the school before I came in September.

Teacher: Is that right, did you enjoy it?

Child: It was really good, (she smiled at this point) but it's not a bit like the real thing.

Teacher: What do you mean?

Child: You get the impression this is what happens all the time. You don't do any boring bits like geography and R.E.

Using this as a starting point he goes on to explore the way in which the school is represented in different discourses and how this relates to the person speaking. He then proceeds to see this in the light of his own actions in an environment where his seniors give primacy to the public image and the conflict this causes with his own perceived task which he sees as being governed by 'longer term' issues.

Example 4

A nursery teacher in getting the children to sing a song about their families suddenly became aware that the meaning she herself brought to the word 'family' was completely inappropriate in her school where a large number of children lived in single parent families. A child, apparently not saddened by this song, was rather confused by his inability to take part. As his teacher put it the child 'could not fully join in the game because he did not have, as it were, all the 'cards of the game.' This gave rise to an enquiry of various other terms whose meaning she herself had learnt in a very different cultural environment (i.e. of nuclear families and full employment). In discussing the incident with colleagues towards addressing the issues being highlighted the teacher records:

I was concerned that by choosing this song to teach the children I was, indirectly, projecting the view of one kind of family being 'better' than another. Whilst I cannot remember who said what I am clear about the different ideas that were expressed (by my colleagues). One was that perhaps the child was in the process of 'making sense of his world' and that his comments about the song indicate a realisation that his particular circumstances are not like those that are featured in the song. It was mentioned that our children are exposed to the media, especially television advertisements which constantly perpetuate the notion of a 'family' as being of the '2-4 variety' and that we should be

helping our children both to explore and then explode this myth. Another colleague felt that we should be guiding the children to both see and understand that there are similarities and differences which exist within the notion of what is a 'family'.

The teacher goes on to record how a school policy on such issues emerged. But she also uses the incident as a paradigm for addressing other issues and in particular how 'the process of 'analysis' and 'reflection' and then 'reconstruction' is always on-going'.

In all of these four examples the teachers are confronted with a task of noticing and describing themselves operating in a particular situation. In developing this awareness they can then begin to re-classify the situation according to what they can do about it. In exploring potential strategies within their professional situation they learn more about themselves in the more active mode of 'initiator of change' within their practice and thus become more aware of the control they have over it. In the first example this required a category shift where the teacher moved from seeing herself as someone effecting change on a situation to seeing herself as part of a changing situation. In the second example, the teacher shifted her attention from what was annoying her to what was annoying the members of the class as a whole. In the fourth example the teacher became more aware of how her use of words emanating from her own background were being received by children from a rather different background. Such re-scriptings shift us from seeing a subject operating on an objective situation towards seeing subject and object in a more complementary relation where the subject is part of the situation upon which he or she is operating. Brown (in press) offers a fuller discussion of how such a subject-object duality can be addressed. This softening of the subject-in-themselves generated through a process of reflective writing enables the practitioner to gain a fuller appreciation of how he or she is part of his or her field for action.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In talking about one's own professional practice there is always a difficulty associated with clarifying the status of remarks made. It is often very easy to slip into offering an endless chain of anecdotes that fail to provide a structure to the field of practice that might enable effective assertive action within it. At the other extreme there is also a risk of offering general statements insufficiently supported by grounded evidence. In recognising the need to develop modes of writing that support teachers in structuring and operating on their practice, strategies for contextualising and empowering anecdotes in a more generalised structure need to be found. This paper has shown how the teacher as a subject can construct notions of their practice and the situation of which it is part in language through psycho-analytic techniques. The practitioner's perspective is placed at the centre, with practice being described through the eyes of the practitioner. It is the identity of the practitioner, as constructed, that provides the framework through which practice and the situation of which it is part can be contextualised. The account offered in respect of this is not an 'objective' view as might be seen from the outside but rather an account of a practitioner describing a situation of which they are part. The authority of such accounts is derived from the practitioner describing his or her own personal

perspective. Such accounts might be seen as being read by other practitioners faced with their own particular concerns, who may resonate with the strategies being pursued.

By developing strategies towards emphasising the intentional component of any action, the practitioner can assume a more assertive relation to his or her professional practice, seeing it in terms of what they can do about it. By categorising their potential field of action according to the control they see themselves having over it they can see their practice as more target-oriented towards bringing about particular states of affairs. The writing done in respect of this is a mechanism for fixing successive categorisations in the process of the practitioner moving from positioning him or her self in their professional situation towards shaping this and by implication themselves.

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